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ABSTRACT

The University Poll is a mechanism for conducting opinion surveys at the University of Minnesota. This paper examines responses from four University Poll surveys conducted in 1972 and 1973 in an attempt to portray trends in student opinion on the issues of student self-determination, student satisfaction with university experiences, and perceived student needs. Results suggest a strong desire among students to participate in university decisionmaking, basic student satisfaction with academic experiences, and considerable selectivity in supporting programs with required fees. (Author)

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The University Poll is a mechanism for surveying student and faculty opinion at the University of Minnesota. It is a service provided to University offices and registered student groups on a contractual basis by Student Life Studies, a research unit of the Office for Student Affairs. Since its inception in 1972, the University Poll has conducted opinion surveys for a variety of offices and groups. Each of these surveys has focused upon issues of interest to the contracting party, with no attempt to integrate successive surveys. The purpose of this report is to reanalyze the combined responses from four of these surveys conducted in 1972 and 1973, in an attempt to portray general trends in student opinion during this period.

METHOD

University Poll surveys are conducted according to the following procedure: (1) A random sample of the target population is drawn from a list of the total population. (2) Survey items are determined by the contracting party and staff of Student Life Studies, and telephone pretested by professional pollsters. Questions are usually structured so that they may be asked and answered within five minutes. (3) A professional polling organization surveys as many respondents as possible by telephone during a four day period. Those who are not contacted by phone are mailed survey items, with a follow-up mailing to non-respondents. The entire conduct of the survey takes place within a two-week period. Response rates for the surveys range between 70% & 90%.

During 1972-73, seven surveys were conducted by the University Poll. Three of these surveys are not considered in the present analysis, one because of technical inadequacy, and two because they relate to narrow issues (local publications and radio stations). The majority of items from the remaining four surveys were regrouped into three categories: (1) Items bearing on student

self-determination--the role of students in decision-making. (2) Items relating to student satisfaction with academic experiences, student services and administrative actions. (3) Items relating to the perceived needs of students, including the needs of special groups within the university community, as well as those programs and services for which students were willing to pay.

RESULTS

I. Student self-determination

The first University Poll survey, taken in Winter of 1972, asked several questions about the degree of student participation and control desired by respondents. Two groups, one a random sample of all students at the Twin Cities Campus, and the other a sample of student senators, were polled. When asked about participation in the activities of the Board of Regents, 75% of the general sample and 89% of the student senator sample felt that students should have at least some control over the issues considered by the Board. The general sample was fairly evenly split over the question of actual voting power on Regents' business, with 52% favoring no voting rights 24% favoring student voting rights on Regents' sub-committees (but not on the Board itself), and 24% favoring full voting rights on the Board. Student senators supported student enfranchisement on the Board, more strongly, with 32% supporting voting at the subcommittee level and 45% favoring student voting power at the Board level.

Student self-determination of their academic coursework was considered in another item from the first survey. Students and student senators were asked how much choice students should have in determining their own programs. Forty-three percent of the general sample and 51% of the student senator sample felt that students should be allowed to choose all their courses, with the only restriction being the number of credits required for graduation. Only 1%

of the general sample and 2% of the senator sample felt that student should have no choice at all in their programs. The remainder of both groups supported the middle position that students should be allowed to choose courses with content areas (e.g. science, humanities) to satisfy the number of credits required. In addition 67% of the general student sample and 77% of the student senators endorsed a Bachelor of Elected Studies program, which would allow students much more choice in determining their coursework than permitted under traditional B.A. and B.S. programs.

The sixth survey, taken in Winter, 1973, inquired about students' desire to have a role in evaluating faculty. Sixty-two percent of a general student sample felt that students should have at least some voting members on committees to evaluate the research and scholarly capabilities of faculty members; 76% felt that students should at least have some vote in decisions about faculty advising, and 88% advocated at least some student voting power in evaluating faculty teaching.

In the fifth survey, also conducted in Winter of 1973, a sample of the general student body was asked about student determination of required student fees. Seventy-six percent endorsed the concept of students' having a voice in fee setting, with 41% favoring fee setting by a committee with equal representation of students and administrators, 19% favoring fee setting by committee with a majority of students, and 26% favoring fee setting by student referendum.

Support for the control of student services by the student government was assessed by three items in the first survey. Sixty-nine percent of the general sample and 75% of the senator sample felt that the student government should seek to gain some control over student services. When asked about specific student services the student government should seek to control, responses from the general sample indicated that 38% advocated control over housing, 58% control over a bookstore, 32% control over food services, 25%

control over counseling and 50% control over student unions, while 7% marked none. Among the student senators, 70% marked housing, 45% food services, 36% counseling, and 48% student unions. Additionally, 72% of the general sample and 84% of the senator sample felt that the student government should be allowed to construct a student-controlled housing project on university property.

II. Student satisfaction

The sixth University Poll survey inquired about students' satisfaction with their academic experiences. When a general sample of students was asked to rate their satisfaction with the overall quality of instruction they had received, 85% reported being either satisfied or very satisfied while 10% reported being dissatisfied or very dissatisfied, with the remaining 5% undecided. A majority of respondents reported that they were satisfied with at least half of the teaching assistants (70%) and faculty members (88%) from whom they had taken courses.

Evaluation of the degree to which faculty members aided students in fulfilling their degree requirements were somewhat less positive, with 21% stating that their teachers were not helpful, and 63% saying that they were helpful, with the remainder undecided. Similarly, evaluations of academic advising were less positive than evaluations of teaching, with 56% being satisfied or very satisfied with their advisors, 24% being dissatisfied with them, and the remainder undecided.

In contrast to the academic area, general evaluations of the university's administration were not ascertained in any of the surveys. Evaluations of administrative actions were in relation to two specific campus issues. One of these issues was the university's response to a campus anti-war demonstration in May 1972. The survey, number three, was taken one week following an incident in which city police were called in to clear the campus. Seventy-two

percent of the general student sample reported that they were dissatisfied with the manner in which the police handled the demonstration. The response of the university's administration to the demonstration was regarded somewhat more positively, with more students (48%) reporting satisfaction with the actions of the administration than dissatisfaction (39%).

The other issue of which administrative response was evaluated was a decision not to hire a gay activist who had applied for a position with the university. Eighty-one percent of the general student sample and 93% of the student senator sample in the first survey felt that the University was not justified in this decision.

III. Perceived needs

The surveys assessed students' perceptions of their needs in two ways--first by asking them whether they thought particular programs and services were justified, and secondly by asking them whether they would be willing to have their student fees support specified programs. In the academic area majority support was voiced for special studies programs for a variety of groups. Responses of the general student sample in the first survey indicated support by 84% for a Black Studies program, 62% for a Chicano Studies program, 82% for Native American Studies and 67% for Womens Studies. Non-academic special services for women were also supported by majorities of both the general sample and student senators. Over 80% of each group felt that the University Health Service should provide women students with pap smears, birth control techniques, abortion counseling, and pregnancy tests. Less support, 58% of the general sample and 65% of the senators, was offered for the provision of pre and post natal care.

The fifth survey, taken in Winter, 1973, asked a general sample of students their feelings about the allocation of student fees. A majority favored required fees for: the student newspaper (68%), the student government (53%),

and the student union (52%). Fifty percent favored a required fee for the University Health Service although 75% said they would pay an optional health service fee. A majority of students were against requiring fees for the following services and programs: renovation of the student union (53%), and intercollegiate athletic building (74%), an intramural athletics program (72%), a student-controlled public interest research group (77%), and a student-owned FM radio station (80%).

DISCUSSION

The most consistent trend in the surveys analyzed here was the desire of students to participate in making the decisions which affect them. The issue of student self-determination was considered in several areas including decisions about academic requirements, evaluations of faculty, and allocation of student fees. In each of these areas, not only student leaders, but students in general, offered majority support for a substantial student role in decision making. It would appear that many of the views of the Student Power Movement of the sixties were assimilated into the majority viewpoint among students in the early seventies. There were, however, some limits to the desire for power. The majority did not endorse full voting rights for students on the Board of Regents although they were somewhat more willing to support such rights on Regents' subcommittees. Also students were not ready to have their student government take over the provision of basic student personnel services such as counseling, housing, and health services although they were willing to support the concept that students should have some control over student services, especially in housing. Mechanisms for participation, not outright control, seemed to be the focal point for student desires to influence university policy. As might be expected, student leaders had stronger feelings

about participation than did other students. The opinions of those leaders, however, were only more pronounced and not essentially discordant with the opinions of their constituencies.

The generally positive opinions students had of their instructors suggest satisfaction with the most basic aspect of university life. While advisors and administrators may not fare so well, those who provide instruction seem to be held in relatively high esteem. At least at the University of Minnesota it is unlikely that the basic quality of instruction will become a target of student unrest in the near future.

Students were quite sensitive to the needs of minority groups as evienced by support for programs of study for Blacks, Chicanos, and Native Americans. The somewhat lower support for Women's Studies may be a reflection of the fact that the Women's Movement was just beginning a period of ascendancy at the time the question was asked. Special health services for women, however, were strongly supported.

When students were asked not just about need, but whether they were willing to fund programs with required fees, their responses were highly selective. Student unions, the student government and the student newspaper were seen as deserving required fees, but the union renovation, intramural athletics, and FM radio station, a consumer research group, and a new athletic building were not. Opinion about required fee support of the health service was almost evenly divided. Student appeared to feel that fees should be required of all students only for those services likely to be used by nearly all students. They seemed to be reluctant to subsidize services and programs which are likely to be utilized by a minority of students.